

Vice President Operations and Communications Annual Report
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1. Introduction

My term as the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) Vice-President Operations and Communications commenced on May 1st, 2016. During my term, I focused on the internal operations of the GSA. These duties include the general supervision of the office activities and staff, coordinating the GSA Bursary selection process, overseeing the implementation of additional programs and services, and advocating for additional financial support for graduate students. I also assumed the duties of the President's briefly during his leave.

This past year has proved to be quite productive and successful for the GSA in terms of engagement of graduate students. In addition to communicating through emails and PAWS announcements, I utilized several social media platforms to promote events and services. Additionally, in collaboration with Oohlala, I was also able to create the GSA mobile app, which offers several useful tools to graduate students. I am also pleased to have had the opportunity to create two new ad-hoc GSA committees to address sustainability and health and wellness, oversee the GSA Bursary Committee which awarded 60 bursaries in total, and implement five new initiatives at the GSA. These initiatives include the Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Program, Mental Health First Aid, Breastfeeding-Friendly Space, Positive Space and Notary Service.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the GSA Office Manager, Sherri Rohovich, for her invaluable encouragement, assistance, guidance and inspiration throughout my term! I would like to acknowledge the following people with heartfelt appreciation: the GSA Executive, the Office Coordinators, Yina Liu, Qi Guo, Varun Gaur and Bassey Bassey, the GSA Councillors and the Council Chair, Robert Henderson, as well as the GSA volunteers. I would

also like to thank the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (CGPS) and the University of Saskatchewan Administration for their ongoing support of the GSA initiatives.

2. GSA Communications

As the incoming VP Operations and Communications, one of my main goals was to improve the engagement of graduate students. Therefore, I assumed the responsibility of communicating organizational announcements to the graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. To do this, I have employed several platforms to reach members.

2.1. GSA Website

Throughout the spring and summer 2016 terms, I took on the project of reinvigorating our website to make information more accessible to graduate students, as well as to highlight the diversity of our services. This project was initiated by the 2015/2016 GSA President, Chakravarty. After many months of uploading, verifying, and updating, I believe that we have finally made a great stride in creating a new website that is comprehensive and user-friendly. It was officially launched in August 2016. Additional content to enhance the graduate students' experience was added. I strongly believe in the importance of community engagement, and wanted to showcase volunteering opportunity in Saskatoon to graduate students. Therefore, I created a page that included various volunteering positions with several organizations in our community. It was also important for me to connect graduate students to relevant services on campus that they could utilize, including the Aboriginal Students' Centre, Student Counselling Services, SafeWalk, the Student Employment and Career Centre amongst many others.

I invited the graduate students to visit the new website and provide feedback, as I was continuously working to improve the content and formatting. I have only received positive feedback. With a new year ahead, I recommend the new executive to review the content and update it to the best of their ability to ensure accuracy of information.

I would like to thank the Executive Committee for their assistance on this project.

2.2. GSA Social Media

The GSA was quite active on [Facebook](#), however, the organization did not have or was not active on other social media platforms prior to my term. Therefore, at the beginning of my term, I reactivated the [Twitter](#) account, as well as created an [Instagram](#) page for the GSA. To engage graduate students on these platforms, I frequently posted announcements. To gain followers' attention, I utilized graphic design to make posters for events and services that are eye-catching and informative.

Currently, we have over 1000 followers on Facebook, 235 followers on Twitter, and 133 followers on Instagram. These numbers continue to grow and I recommend that the incoming executive ensure maintaining these pages and keeping them up to date, as they serve as an efficient method of communication with members. To reach more members, I also recommend sharing these pages at the end of each email sent out to graduate students to increase their awareness of our social media accounts.

2.3. GSA Mobile App

I was quite excited to begin my term as the VP Operation and Communication, as I had the opportunity to work with Oohlala, a company that builds campus apps for student organizations across North America to create our very own [GSA App](#). This opportunity was funded and supported by the Canadian Federation of Students. The GSA App brings several services to students' fingertips. It is also a platform for graduate students to interact and have discussion on the campus wall about housing, books, courses and more. It was a successful way of promoting various events throughout the year by pushing relevant content to their mobile phones. This created an active dialogue amongst graduate students and increased attendance and

engagement with GSA events and services. The app offers graduate students the following features:

- Classes: Manage classes, create to-dos & reminders, and stay on top of assignments.
- Study Tools: Keep track of study sessions and build effective study habits with our study timer.
- Timetable Sharing: See when friends are in class and free.
- Events: Find what events are happening on campus.
- Tour: Explore your Campus.
- Deals: Access exclusive discounts.
- Campus Services: Learn about services offered.
- Groups & Clubs: How to get involved with campus clubs.
- Campus Feed: Join the campus discussion.
- Campus Map: Directions to classes, events and offices.
- Students List: Communicate with fellow students.

I continuously worked with the Community Manager, Ali Janjua through monthly meetings to create promotional plans to increase the membership of the app. Currently, there are 445 registered users. According to Janjua, the best time to increase registration is the beginning of the academic year, therefore, I heavily promoted the App during the Fall Orientations, and that is when most of the users registered and downloaded the App, as well as activity. Figure 1 demonstrates that majority of the GSA App activity took occurred during September – October 2016. I recommend that the incoming executive promote the app during the Fall 2017 orientation to increase registrations and activity of the GSA App.

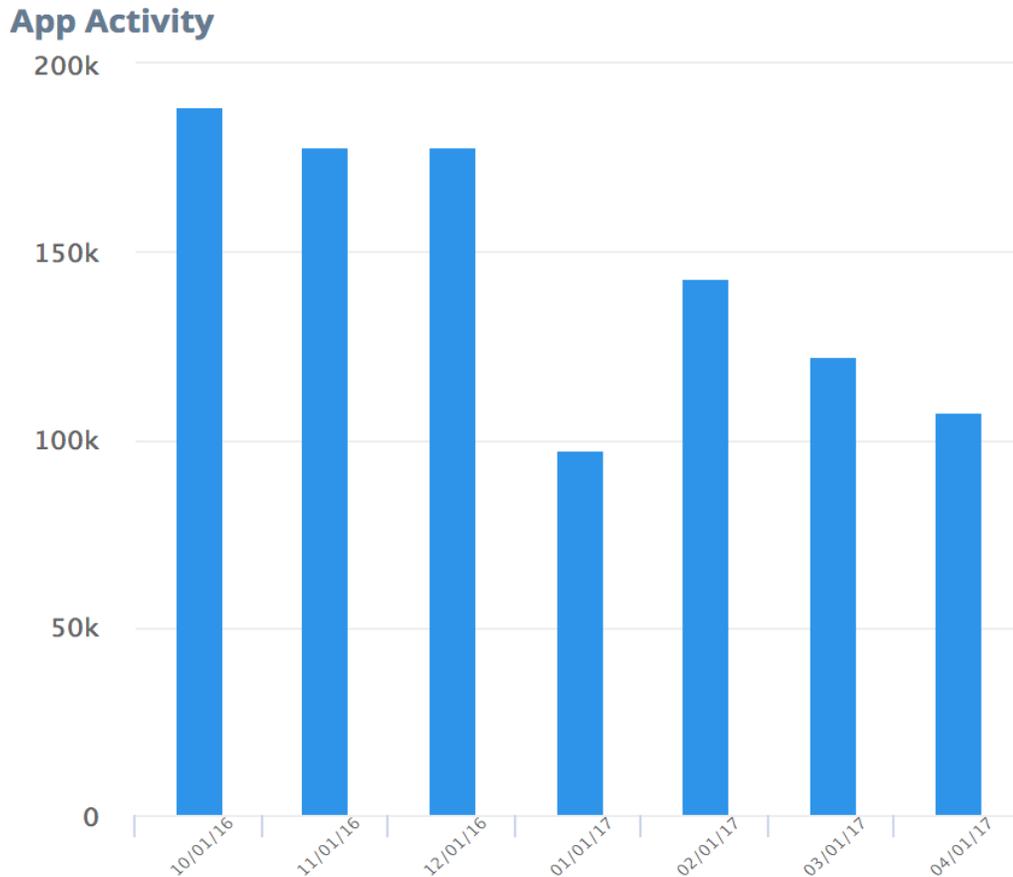


Figure 1. GSA App Activity

2.4. Emails & PAWS Announcements

Over the past year, I sent frequent emails and announcements to graduate students via the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (CGPS). Such announcements included information about social, financial and academic events, monthly newsletters, services, such as bursary, U-Pass, Notary Service, GSA App, and employment opportunities within the GSA amongst many others. I found this to be the most efficient way to communicate with our members, and I have received positive feedback from graduate students explaining that the GSA was quite active this past year and actively worked to better engage them. On average, I sent about 2 emails per weeks. To not bombard members with emails, I developed a GSA monthly

Newsletter that included events, announcements and president's message. CGPS was accommodating with sending emails and PAWS announcements to members to ensure transparency and engagement, however, due to the busy schedules of the staff, information was not always communicated on a timely manner. At times, there were 2-3 business day lags. To overcome this, I have met with the staff several times, as well the U of S Communication Coordinator to come up with GSA communication plans. The new GSA executive will be working to attain their own copy of the list of graduate students to communicate more effectively. However, until this takes place, I recommend the new executive to also continue building the relationship with CGPS staff to enhance the communication process for our members.

3. GSA Official Record

To ensure full transparency and engagement with our members, I worked very hard to follow the GSA Bylaws in terms of publishing the GSA records within a maximum of 5 days of any executive meeting. In total, there are 21 Executive Meeting minutes published on the GSA website.

4. GSA Commons

The GSA Commons is a comfortable intellectual area for graduate students to study, relax and to socialize with their peers. Over the past year, we hosted many lectures, presentations and social functions. The GSA Commons was also booked by various academic councils and the campus community. We worked with the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching Effectiveness and the Student Employment and Career Centre to host their workshops and industry talks. As part of my effort, over the upcoming year, the GSA will cooperate with the Student Counselling Services to offer an eight-week Mindfulness Meditation Course.

In an effort to save costs in the GSA budget, the Executive and I volunteered to work several shifts to cover the GSA Office Manager's vacation time. This was great experience for the Executive to become acquainted with the operations of the Commons and interact with members.

I would like to once again thank the Office Manager, Sherri Rohovich, and the Office Coordinators for working very hard to make the Commons a welcoming and a positive space for all graduate students.

5. New Initiatives

During my term as the VP Operations and Communications, I implemented four new initiatives and programs at the GSA, namely the Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Program, Mental Health First Aid, Notary Service, Positive Space, and certified the GSA as Breastfeeding friendly space.

5.1. Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Program

During my term, I believed in the importance of collaboration with other organizations and groups on campus to strengthen our community. Therefore, I partnered with Brooke Malinoski, USSU VP Academic to establish the Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Program, a pilot project. This program aimed to connect undergraduate students who interested in pursuing graduate studies with qualified graduate students in their desired fields. As mentors, graduate students will assist undergraduate students by providing guidance and advice on various topics relating to graduate studies, such as application process, programs, research, funding, and student-supervisor relationships. The Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Program will encourage and promote networking amongst students at the different levels of academia. This

year, we were able to connect 11 undergraduate students with graduate mentors and sponsor their first meeting at Louise Loft.

I hope that the GSA and the USSU will be able to continue working on and promoting this project and formalizing it to connect more mentees and mentors. Additionally, I recommend creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between GSA and USSU for this project. It would also be beneficial to pursue creating a centralized application system to enhance the matching process.

5.2. Mental Health First Aid

Mental health issues continue to be a concern amongst graduate students. When graduate students experience distressful situations, the GSA is the initial help for many students. Although our Executive and staff may listen and sympathize with our members, we're not professionally trained to recognize signs and symptoms of mental illnesses and when to refer someone towards professional help. Therefore, I advocated for Mental Health First Aid training to overcome this challenge. After discussing this with our Executive and staff, I realized that there's not only an interest, but a strong need to receive this training to best serve our members and ensure their overall health and wellbeing. I was able to fundraise \$500 from StudentCare. Our Office Manager, Sherri Rohovich obtained the Mental Health First Aid training and certification, as she directly deals with members when visiting the GSA Commons. I recommend the new Executive to engage in further fundraising to support this initiative and train the Executive and Office Coordinators prior to the beginning of the new academic year.

5.3. Notary Service

At the beginning of my term, I advocated that the GSA begins to offer a Notary Service to our members. A Notary Public is an official of integrity appointed by the Minister of Justice,

to serve the public as an impartial witness in performing a variety of official fraud-deterrent acts related to the signing of important documents. A Notary's duty is to screen the signers of important documents for their true identity, their willingness to sign without duress or intimidation and their awareness of the contents of the document or transaction. Some notarizations also require the Notary to put the signer under an oath, declaring that the information contained in a document is true and correct. After seeking the support of the GSA Executive Committee and attaining the approval of our Office Manager, Sherri Rohovich, we pursued this opportunity. Rohovich is now a certified Notary Public and provides this service 4 times in a month on average free of charge for graduate students. We currently do not provide this service to non-members. I recommend further promoting this service to our members in the upcoming year.

5.4. Positive Space

I ran to make the GSA a Positive Space during the GSA Executive elections. I coordinated for the GSA staff and executive to attend the Positive Space workshops to receive training during the Fall term. In total, 4 coordinators and 4 executives attended the Positive Space training sessions and became certified through the Pride Centre and the Provost Advisory Committee for Gender and Sexual Diversity. I recommend that the incoming GSA Executive receive this training to ensure the GSA Commons is a safer place for gender and sexual diversity.

5.5. Breastfeeding-Friendly Space

In my effort of having a Comfort Room in the GSA, I certified the GSA Commons as a designated Breastfeeding-Friendly location at the University of Saskatchewan campus through Breastfeeding Matters Saskatoon. According to the Facilities Management Division, the GSA

cannot turn one of the vacant rooms in the basement into a Comfort Room due to fire hazard.

However, graduate students who are mothers and breastfeeding can now utilize the GSA

Commons for more privacy and reduced noise.

6. University of Saskatchewan Initiatives

Throughout my term, I engaged the University of Saskatchewan campus community to represent graduate students in several initiatives and activities, particularly, the Sexual Assault Awareness Week that occurred in the Fall of 2016. I participated in the REACT to Sexual Assault campaign along with the VP External and President, as well as student leaders and University Administration across the campus to ensure the U of S is a safe community. I also took part in a panel discussion along with the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning, USSU VP Student Affairs and a representative of the Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre.

7. University and CGPS Representation

Graduate student representation on important University of Saskatchewan Committees was a major goal for the 2016/2017 Executive. Prior to this year, graduate students were underrepresented on several committees that make decisions impacting the graduate students' experience at the University of Saskatchewan. To ensure the voices of graduate students are heard, our Executive worked hard to attend and engage in various committees. As the VP Operations and Communications, I sat on the following University Council Committees and CGPS Committees:

- Wellness Strategy Team Committee
- Academic Programs Committee
- Graduate Academic Programs Committee, CGPS
- Executive Director Search Committee, School of Public Health

- Copyright Advisory Committee
- IGSC Bursary Committee

8. Existing and New GSA Committees Representation

Over the past year, I served on the Summer/Spring, Fall and Winter GSA Bursary Selection Committee. Additionally, I established two new ad-hoc committees, namely the GSA Sustainability Committee and the GSA Health and Wellness Committee.

8.1. GSA Bursary Selection Committee

I oversaw the bursary process at all stages this past year from the application announcement to the final selections. I chaired the Spring/Summer, Fall and Winter GSA Bursary Selection Committees. At these meetings, I ensured that the committee used a rubric based on the following criteria per the GSA policy:

- i. Students who are ineligible for major scholarships.
- ii. Students who have exhausted the funding for their program.
- iii. Students in need of child care services.
- iv. Students who have demonstrated financial need
- v. Students with good community involvement
- vi. Students with strong academic performance.

The privacy of the applicants was maintained and all committee members signed a confidentiality agreement prior to reviewing and evaluating applications. These applications and documents are protected and locked in the GSA Commons with the Office Manager.

Thanks to the donation from the CGPS, the amount of money allocated for the Fall 2016 term and Winter 2017 term bursary competition was a total of \$50,000, while \$10,000 was allocated for the Spring/Summer 2016 terms. This is the highest amount ever awarded in

bursaries by the GSA. In the Spring/Summer 2016 terms, 10 bursary recipients were selected out of 43 completed applications. In the Fall 2016 term, 25 bursary recipients were selected out of 99 applications. In the Winter 2017 term, 25 bursary recipients were selected out of 101 applications.

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the GSA President and Executive in fundraising for this program and CGPS for supporting the GSA Bursary. Additionally, I would like to thank the GSA Bursary Selection Committee for their dedication and efforts on this program. During my term, I observed the growing need for financial support amongst graduate students, and I recommend the incoming Executive to continue increasing the number of these bursaries. I also recommend the incoming VP Operations and Communication and the GSA Bursary Selection Committee to continue enhancing the bursary process.

8.2. GSA Ad-Hoc Sustainability Committee

To promote environmental, economic and social sustainability issues, I established and served as the chair of the GSA Ad-Hoc Sustainability Committee in November 2016. The GSA Sustainability Committee assumes the responsibility of sustainability initiatives and implementing sustainable practices at the GSA, as well as collaborating and building partnerships with other units that deal with sustainability on campus. One of the major projects of the GSA Sustainability Committee was to host a Sustainability Slam and a Carbonless Concert during the Graduate Achievement Week at the University of Saskatchewan. The purpose of the GSA Sustainability Slam was to encourage creative and imaginative storytelling with an academic twist, as well as interdisciplinary thinking using both art and science, in order to inspire sustainable practices and lifestyles among graduate students at U of S. This event provides 8 graduate students with the platform to creatively present their research and projects

on, as well as solutions for, sustainability issues we face in our day to day lives to inspire living more sustainably. This event was followed by a Carbonless Concert in the GSA Commons for the participants, judges and audience to enjoy. The Sustainability Slam and Carbonless Concert was sponsored by the Office of Sustainability. There were 3 winners and 1 audience choice. This event was quite successful, and several graduate students stated that they would like it to be held again next year.

Over the upcoming year, the GSA Sustainability Committee also aims to develop a GSA Sustainability Policy, organize a Sustainability Career Fair, as well as host monthly Sustainability Workshops amongst other initiatives.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the GSA Sustainability Committee members, Jaylene Murray, Jania Chilima, Naomi Maina, Viktoria Hinz, and Michael Cavallaro for dedicating many hours to promote sustainability amongst graduate students. None of this wouldn't have been possible without their commitment to the vision of this committee. I would also like to thank Jaylene Murray for representing the needs of graduate students on the President's Sustainability Council. I strongly recommend the maintenance of this committee and passing it as a standing GSA Committee.

8.3. GSA Ad-Hoc Health & Wellness Committee

Recognizing that mental illness is a prevalent public health concern amongst students in postsecondary students, the VP External, Natalia Andreyevna, initiated monthly Health Chats to promote positive mental health through workshops. Prior to running for the GSA Executive, I volunteered as a facilitator for the Health Chats. These workshops consisted of two components. The first component involved a discussion on relevant mental health issues, while the second component involved a physical activity session. Through these Health Chats, my colleagues and

I, as leaders were able to advocate for the importance of positive mental health amongst graduate students. This year, the VP External, Carolyn Gaspar and I created and co-chaired the GSA Ad-Hoc Health and Wellness Committee to maintain the Health Chats, and undertake other health-related initiatives within this committee. The mandates of this committee are:

- I. Promote the physical, psychological, social health and wellbeing of graduate students and address relating issues;
- II. Assume responsibility for implementation of health and wellbeing related initiatives to improve the graduate students' experience; and
- III. Collaborate with other groups that deal with health and wellbeing.

This Committee organized the following Health Chats:

- Stress Management & Yoga
- Maternal Mental Health
- Therapy Dog Session (In partnership with St. John Ambulance)
- Health & Dental Plan Info Session
- Staying Physically Active in Graduate School
- Yoga Class (In partnership with Moksha Hot Yoga Saskatoon)
- Mindfulness Meditation

Although we experienced low attendance rates, our attendees provided positive feedback.

The GSA values its member's success during graduate studies and believes a student's success is dependent on their wellness. Therefore, I recommend the new GSA Executive to continue maintaining this Committee by making it a standing GSA committee to promote the health and wellbeing of graduate students by addressing their unique needs on campus. I would also

recommend a stronger collaboration with the Peer Health Mentors in planning for events tailored towards the needs of graduate students.

For the upcoming year, I was able to advocate for hosting the eight-week Mindfulness Meditation in the GSA Commons on Wednesdays, September 20th – November 29th, 2017. These sessions will be led by the Registered Psychologist, Vicki Herman from the Student Counselling Services. On average, 20-25 students register for this program, and half of the spots will be reserved for graduate students. Two guided practices and a brief teaching and discussion opportunities will be provided in each session.

I also participated in multiple focus groups and meetings discussing the areas of religious and spiritual life on campus hosted by the Office of the Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning. The University of Saskatchewan recognizes the importance of spiritual wellness in building a healthy student body, and a respectful, inclusive campus. Therefore, I represented the GSA Health and Wellness Committee on this project to identify graduate students' needs in terms of programming.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee members, Carolyn Gaspar, Asma Ahmend and Miranda Cary for their dedication and efforts to promoting the health of graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. I would also like to recognize the ongoing support of the Student Health Services' Health Education Coordinator, Rita Hanoski, the Director of Support Services, Peter Hadley, and Parents' on Campus President, kayla Maddar.

9. Social Events

To further enrich my experience serving graduate students as the VP Operations and Communications and engaging members, I helped in organizing and promoting several events, including the monthly social events, academic workshops, fall and winter orientations, and more. I specifically planned the following events over the past year:

- **Consent Culture:**

In collaboration with the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), the GSA hosted a talk on Consent Culture. This workshop was an opportunity for graduate student to learn, share stories and work towards ending sexual assaults on campus. This event took place on September 30th, 2017 during the University of Saskatchewan Sexual Assault Awareness Week.

- **Movie Night - Halloween:**

In collaboration with the VP Student Affairs, Shailza Sapal, I hosted a free screening of the movie 'Halloween' on October 28, 2016. It was a great opportunity for students to meet people and engage in Halloween-themed activities.

- **Copyright Information Session:**

In collaboration with the U of S Copyright Center hosted an event to discuss copyright and the role it plays in graduate studies on January 26th, 2017. Topics discussed included students' rights who use copyright-protected materials, students' rights as creators (e.g., thesis), as well as how and when to seek clearance/permission for using a copyright-protected work.

- **Poetry Night - International Women's Day:**

In collaboration with the VP Student Affairs, Shailza Sapal, I hosted a poetry night social to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8th, 2017. This event featured lively poetry readings by 6 participants to honor the achievements and accomplishments of women. This was followed by a social reception.

10. ThinkGRAD Conference

The VP External, Carolyn Gaspar and I have had the opportunity to attend the GU15 conference in Hamilton from August 10th - August 12th, 2016. This conference was quite important for us to be a part of as we will be hosting the next GU15 conference at the U of S. At this conference, we have discussed several important issues relating to the graduate

student experience, shared best practices, and have also made several important decisions regarding the future of the GU15. 9 of the U15 GSA's were present at this conference. GU15 was initially an informal conference that promoted information and best practices sharing and networking. Many the GSA representatives voted that the GU15 must become incorporated, and become ThinkGRAD, a Think Tank that works to explore graduate students' needs on a national level. Research and the outputs of this organization will then be employed in advocacy on provincial and national levels.

The University of Saskatchewan GSA will be hosting the first ThinkGRAD Conference on April 19-21, 2017 in Saskatoon, SK. Therefore, I'm assisting the VP External and the GSA President, along with a councillor, Naheda Sahtout in planning this conference. The purpose of this conference is to bring together graduate student representatives from across Canada and provide them a platform to network, share best practices and strategically plan research themes for the upcoming year.